

ART AND ECONOMICS

Sienese Paintings from the Dawn of the Financial Age



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Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



FROM ITS VANTAGE POINT HIGH IN THE HILLS OF TUSCANY, SIENA WAS UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO BECOME ONE OF THE MAJOR COMMERCIAL, BANKING AND ARTISTIC CENTERS OF MEDIEVAL EUROPE. STRADDLING THE VIA FRANCIGENA, THE MAIN THOROUGHFARE BETWEEN FRANCE AND THE PAPACY IN ROME, AND SURROUNDED BY RICH AND FERTILE FIELDS, SIENA EMERGED AS ONE OF THE EARLIEST AND MOST SUCCESSFUL INDEPENDENT CITY-STATES OR COMMUNES OF THE 12TH TO 14TH CENTURIES. HER BANKERS AND MERCHANTS WERE AMONG THE MOST PROMINENT IN THE KNOWN WORLD. DURING THIS PERIOD SIENA WAS CHARACTERIZED BY A SECULAR REGIME THAT ACTIVELY PROMOTED THE CONCEPT OF "CIVIC LIFE," INCLUDING PATRONAGE OF THE ARTS AS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GOOD GOVERNMENT. THIS BECAME THE "GOLDEN AGE" OF SIENESE PAINTING.



Giovanni di Paolo (active 1417-1482), *Gabella*, 1440
San Pietro Alessandrino Enthroned between Adoring Angels
Tempera on panel; Siena, Archivio di Stato, 26

This exhibition is about the confluence of three seemingly disparate elements—art, history and economic thought—in a synergy of civic life. Significantly, the first presentation of this exhibition was timed to coincide with the introduction of the “euro,” the common currency of all Europe. The 50 panel paintings and 12 related manuscripts assembled here are a tribute to the power of the *popolo*, the rule of citizens, rather than church or the nobility, that preceded modern democracies. These *biccherne*, the painted covers of the state ledgers or administrative balance sheets, provide a fascinating window into the daily life of an Italian city-state and evolving republic at the dawn of modern economic thinking. These remarkable works of art derive their name, *biccherne*, from the government agency that originally commissioned them.

In 1257 the Office of the *Biccherna*, the most important financial branch of Sienese government, charged with managing all the revenues and expenses of the *comune*, inaugurated the custom of commissioning panel paintings from the best artists in the community to function as the covers of its semi-annual collection of public ledgers. Shortly thereafter, the Office of the *Gabella*, which was responsible for all



Anonymous, *Biccherna*, July-December, 1258
 Ugo di San Galgano, Bursar
 Tempera on panel; Siena, Archivio di Stato, 1

duties and other taxes on commodities and business transactions, followed suit. Eventually this practice was adopted by other agencies and independent organizations of the city state such as the *Opera della Metropolitana* (the works department of the cathedral), the Hospital of *Santa Maria della Scala* (Saint Mary of the Ladder) and even the university. Today more than 100 of these unique works of art are part of the collection of the State Archives in Siena.

The style and subject matter of the *biccherna* evolved paralleling and documenting the growth of Siena itself. The earliest extant *biccherna* (1258, second semester) depicts simply a portrait of the bursar Ugo, a monk from the nearby powerful abbey of San Galgano, working on the account books at his desk. Often a monk, presumably because his integrity was beyond question at a time of ever-shifting alliances, the bursar or chief financial officer of the *Biccherna* shared his office with four noblemen or *provveditori* whose role was not only to monitor the financial affairs of the city but to provide additional funds as needed. It is interesting to note that traditionally these individuals only held office for a period of six months. Their family shields, coats of arms, quickly became the other significant decorative aspect of the



Sano di Pietro (1405-1481), *Biccherna*, 1473, post quem
 Marriage of Nobility
 Tempera on panel; Siena, Archivio di Stato, 37

covers. Later panels show the bursar, his books, sacks filled with coins, and adjacent chests or coffers. By 1340 portrayals of the bursar with a contributor provide visual evidence of the concept of a modern bank. As the city-state's importance and self-awareness grew, the themes of the covers were expanded to include allegories of the religious and political life of Siena, and even specific historical events. In 1440 an anonymous artist depicted a stonemason building the new fortress walls. And a panel from 1467 shows the Virgin protecting the City during an earthquake while her citizens sought safety in tents constructed outside the city walls.

By the 15th century artists seemed no longer constricted by the size of the records themselves and even began to create small wall paintings. In 1555 Siena was finally defeated by its archrival Florence and absorbed into the grand duchy of Cosimo de' Medici. And, although *biccherna* were still occasionally commissioned into the 17th century, Siena's loss of independent power was reflected in the declining relevance of this art form.

Susan S. Badder
 Senior Curator of Education



This exhibition is presented under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Italy, through the Segretariato Generale della Presidenza della Repubblica, the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Direzione Generale per gli Archivi, and the Fondazione Monte dei Paschi di Siena in cooperation with the Ministero degli Affari Esteri.

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Above: Anonymous, *Biccherna*, 1497

Records from the 14th century (1329-1408)

Tempera on panel; Siena, Archivio dell'Opera della Metropolitana

Cover: School of Sano di Pietro (1405-1481), *Biccherna*, 1451

The Bursar Washes his Hands; the Virgin Protects Siena

Tempera on panel; Siena, Archivio di Stato, 29

Frontispiece: Anonymous, *Biccherna*, 1377-1395

Cover of Register of the Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala

Depicting the Cathedral of Siena

Tempera on panel; Siena, Archivio di Stato, 95

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Museum Hours:

Wednesday through
Monday 10am - 5pm,
Thursday until 9pm,
closed on Tuesday